

June 26, 2006 House Agriculture Committee Hearing  
Canandaigua, New York

Comments by James Bedient, Owner, Bedient Vineyards  
3955 Stever Road, Branchport, NY

Chairman Goodlatte and Members of the Committee,

First I would like to thank Representative Kuhl for hosting this meeting here in the Finger Lakes area, and to the Agriculture Committee for allowing me to make this presentation.

My name is James Bedient, and I grow both wine and juice grapes on a farm in Branchport, New York, just a few miles from Congressman Kuhl's home. This year marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my family on this farm. I also grow a few acres of blueberries and some hay, but growing grapes is my main source of income.

I currently serve as President of New York State Wine Grape Growers, and for the past 2 years have been President of Winegrape Growers of America. Although much of what I will be saying today is the policy for both organizations that I serve, my comments will be based on things that I feel are important for the success of my own farm.

I still recall a conversation that took place 2 years ago, in a visit to my Representative at that time, Amo Houghton. I was trying to impress on the Congressman the value to the farm economy of specialty crops, and why they should generate more interest in Federal farm policy. His statement back to me was that he understood the situation, but wanted to know what I would be able to say to his colleagues from the Midwest whose farmers were very much dependant upon many of the current policies to stay in agriculture. I had to think about a response for quite a while, but I will share my answer with all of you.

I feel that all people involved in farming have to realize how important it is that all of agriculture is healthy and profitable. The key to profitable agriculture is a moving target. Very few successful farms are doing exactly the same thing today that they were doing 10, or even 5 years ago. I'm sure the employees on my farm question my sanity every time we remove a vineyard and replant with a different variety. Every farmer has to look at his farm and try to find ways to make it more profitable. If that means growing new crops, or adding value to crops already being grown, or changing markets for his crops, farmers take the steps necessary to make their farms better if they wish to survive.

We only have to look right here in New York to see what happens as farms struggle to survive financially. In 1990, New York had 38,500 farms working 8.4 million acres. In 2005 the number of farms has decreased to 35,600, with an acreage of 7.55 million. In 15 years, New York has lost 10% of its farmland and 13% of its farmers.

This Farm Bill must be comprehensive enough to keep all aspects of agriculture strong and successful, because an ever smaller percentage of the population is being called upon to produce for the rest, and these farms need the support of the Federal Government so that they may continue to compete economically with the rest of the world.

The key to keeping all of agriculture strong and viable is a working partnership between the agricultural producers and the government so that farms can be profitable and our nation can continue to enjoy a safe, adequate food supply grown domestically and delivered to consumers at a reasonable cost.

The economic value of grapes is very well known in Western New York. Chautauqua and Yates Counties have the 2 largest grape acreages in New York, and Yates County has the highest acreage of wine grapes in the U.S. outside of California. A recent study of the New York grape industry revealed that with a farm gate value of over 30 million dollars, with the total economic impact of the grape, juice and wine business in the state to be 3.4 billion dollars. To increase the worth of a product by 100 times brings many other benefits to the State's economy.

The market for grape juice and grape juice products, primarily Concord grapes, is no more important anywhere in the world than here in Western New York. Juice grapes account for a majority of the acreage in New York's vineyards. On my own farm, about half of the acreage is sold for juice and jelly products, with the remainder sold to wineries.

One of the biggest problems facing future generations in this country is childhood nutrition. New studies recommend 5 to 13 servings of fruits and vegetables daily, and yet childhood obesity and diabetes are on the rise. Grape juice, as well as all fruit juice, should be a larger part of all Government sponsored nutrition plans. While we don't have the advertising budget of Coke or Pepsi, we certainly produce a product far superior for health of our children.

Federal support of crop insurance was undertaken to alleviate the need for annual disaster declarations and bail outs for the farms that were affected. The program was originally set up for annual crops, and I believe it works fairly well for the producers of those crops. The program is also used on many perennial crops, such as grapes, but the usefulness of it is limited by the very nature of crops that are permanently planted in the ground.

Grape growers have a huge investment (between 10-20 thousand dollars per acre) before they even harvest their first crop. If a disaster occurs during the crop season, the grower must still maintain the vines for the future. A row crop farmer has the ability to cut his losses and not put his future year's crop in jeopardy. Some revisions should be made to make the program workable for grapes and all other perennial crops.

Producers should have the option of coverage up to a level of 85%, higher than the current 75% level. Because of the high initial investment, and the costs necessary to maintain plantings even with a total crop loss, 75% of an average yield does not keep a farm in business very long. Often an act of nature in one growing season has a negative effect on the next crop.

I also feel insurance premiums for permanent crops should be subsidized to higher levels than they currently are. The percentage of growers who insure their perennial crops is low compared to those who grow annual crops, and this leads to disaster bills coming up every year in Congress for different areas of the country. If the crop insurance program worked properly, this would not have to happen. As a grape grower, I take little pride in seeing the newspaper headlines read "Growers seek Federal disaster aid for loss of crop".

The consumption of grape juice in the US is many times more per capita than that of any other country in the world. While new grape juice drinkers are being discovered as close as Mexico and Canada, and as far away as China, very little of the foreign market has been tapped. The current MAP program is a beginning to explore some of these markets. It has been already been used successfully by New York's wine industry to bring our products to Canada and the UK. That in turn has generated articles in several world wide wine publications, further enhancing the reputation of New York wine. The continuation and expansion of MAP would be of great value to all grape growers.

The State Block Grants for Specialty Crops program has been an excellent way to fund a very diverse number of specialty crop programs. By allowing each state to have the authority to issue the grants, some of the very issues of the smaller size and greater diversity of specialty crops is accounted for. New York has funded a study on the health benefits of Concord grapes, of which there are many. It also funded a program called "New York Wines and Dines", which introduced New York grown foods and wines into many New York City restaurants.

Most of New York City's population of 8 million or so people didn't know what great products can be produced right here in their own state. The program has been so successful that the New York Marriot Marquis restaurant now has an extensive list of New York wines. I recently heard that other very upscale restaurants in the city are following their lead and featuring many New York wines.

The program for State Block Grants for Specialty Crops should be expanded and fully funded in future years. It is an excellent tool for helping a large segment of agriculture where diversity is the key to its strength.

Here in New York we have begun to develop a set of guidelines for sustainable viticulture. I'm very proud to say that my farm will be participating in this project. The sustainable viticulture will be a very nice fit with the provisions in the Conservation Security Program. Many of the best practices in the sustainable program rank very high in the goals for the CSP. I would hope that the CSP is continued, with funding made

available to producers utilizing sustainable practices, and funded at a rate where all watersheds can participate in a timely manner.

Obviously, the biggest key to the grape industry staying viable and competitive in a world market is research. ARS funding of the new National Grape and Wine Initiative should be at a level of at least 5 million dollars. That is still less than 20% of what Australia spends on research for growing, winemaking and marketing of a very young wine industry. Funding of research benefits all growers from all across the US, and can be done most cost effectively on a national basis.

My final point is that as I have been involved with activities with other grape growers over the last 40 years, I have always thought of myself as one of the "younger" growers. While my perception may now be a little jaded, as I turn 50, I still don't see many growers who are younger than I am.

This farm bill must be able to encourage all aspects of farming to continue and prosper. There has to be a future for new generations to continue to want to farm. We all know the current situation where our lives have become very much dependant on oil from other parts of the world, but I think the situation would be much worse if this country came to the point where we had to rely on the rest of the world as the source for the food we eat.

Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses

House rules require non-governmental witnesses to provide their resume or biographical sketch prior to testifying. If you do not have a resume or biographical sketch available, please complete this form.

1. Name: James Bediant
2. Business Address: 3955 Stever Rd  
Branchport, NY 14418
3. Business Phone Number: 315-595-6674
4. Organization you represent: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Please list any occupational, employment, or work-related experience you have which add to your qualification to provide testimony before the Committee:  
Self Employed Vineyardist for 40 years
6. Please list any special training, education, or professional experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list the capacity in which you are representing that organization, including any offices or elected positions you hold:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

PLEASE ATTACH THIS FORM OR YOUR BIOGRAPHY TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.

Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules\* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: James Bedient  
Address: 3955 Stever Rd Branchport NY 14428  
Telephone: 315-595-6624  
Organization you represent (if any): \_\_\_\_\_

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do NOT require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: \_\_\_\_\_ Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: ☒

Signature: James Bedient

\* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.